

Not the worst, but not Norway: US prisons vs. other models

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Norway's Halden Prison stands in stark contrast to a typical US prison. And Norway's incarceration and recidivism rates do, too.

The US is known for its overcrowded prisons and harsh penitentiary conditions, but how does it rank compared to some of the other prison systems [around the world?](#)

America – the Supermax: How *not* to treat mentally ill patients

One of the most [notorious jails in America](#) is the ADX. The Administrative Maximum Facility, aka the ADX Supermax in Colorado was named in a class-action lawsuit for housing, and worse, segregating, severely mentally ill prisoners. This created a chain reaction. These prisoners were misdiagnosed or not diagnosed at all, so they did not receive mental health treatment. This increased their mental distress, causing those prisoners to act out even more. This led to punishments of stricter confinement, which triggered further declines in mental health. Attempts at suicide and self-harm were “rewarded” with more punishment.

A lawsuit was filed claiming that the ADX was not paying attention to the inmates’ constitutional rights, and was violating both federal and Bureau of Prisons laws.

ADX is designed to house America’s worst criminals. This is where domestic terrorist Theodore Kaczynski (the Unabomber) is doing hard time. However, the way it treats its mentally ill prisoners—and the prison isn’t actually even permitted by law house such prisoners—has resulted in distress on both sides of the bars, to inmates and their loved ones.

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Turkey – Diyarbakir Prison: How to completely ignore basic human rights

Things don’t sound great in America’s Supermax, but in Turkey’s Diyarbakir Prison, [conditions are even worse](#). Originally constructed to hold 744

inmates, as many as 942 have been crowded into the facility at a time. During the 1980s, Diyarbakir was especially notorious, with some dubbing that time the "Period of Barbarity" thanks to common tortures such as beatings, being stripped, sexual assault, sensory deprivation, being hung by the arms, electrocutions and more. During the period of barbarity and beyond, hundreds of prisoners have died while incarcerated in Diyarbakir. Causes of death include hunger strikes, beatings, self-immolation by fire and "mysterious" deaths during interrogations.

Norway – Halden Prison: Reform and release

Modern, cheerful, quiet and peaceful, [Halden Prison in Norway](#) is known as one of the most humane prisons in the world. The sole goal of Halden is rehabilitation, and to that end no expense is spared on art to create a beautiful and inspiring atmosphere, bright and airy cells with enclosed ensuites, bar-free windows, excellent workout facilities, a peaceful treed yard with cheeseboards and benches, and other such niceties. The prison guards are trained to motivate, not intimidate inmates, and robust vocational programming, on-site medical and paramedical facilities keep the prisoner's bodies and minds in good working order. Like ADX, Halden is a supermax, designed to hold the country's worst offenders.

What's Better? Harsh punishment or gentle reformation?

The US prison system is certainly in need of reform, but compared to others around the world, it's not the worst — nor is it the best — system on the planet. Between the two extremes — torture and intimidation versus a focus on education and rehabilitation — which method works best?

[In Norway](#), the incarceration rate is about 75/100,000 people, and the recidivism rate is the lowest in the world at around 20 percent. In the US, more than 700/100,000 people are incarcerated, and more than 70 percent of freed inmates are re-arrested within five years.

What is the difference between the two systems? Although America's system says it's about rehabilitation, its actions focus on punishment and confinement. Norway walks the walk and talks the talk when it comes to rehabilitation and restorative justice, and considers a loss of freedom punishment enough. The focus is on helping inmates prepare to re-enter society with the people and job skills they need.

Looks like Norway's more humane approach to justice nets results far superior results to those of the US system. They want rehabilitated — not broken — people going back out into society.

Christopher Zoukis is the author of [Federal Prison Handbook](#): The Definitive Guide to Surviving the Federal Bureau of Prisons, [College for Convicts: The Case for Higher Education in American Prisons](#) (McFarland & Co., 2014) and [Prison Education Guide](#) (Prison Legal News Publishing, 2016). He can be found online at ChristopherZoukis.com and PrisonerResource.com.